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FM AMEMBASSY AMMAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5946
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 002098

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SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/16/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [JO](#)
SUBJECT: IS DISSOLUTION OF JORDAN'S PARLIAMENT AN OPTION?

REF: A. AMMAN 2097
 [B.](#) 08 AMMAN 1917

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Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[¶1.](#) (S/NF) Summary: In the face of ongoing debates about the effectiveness and legitimacy of the Jordanian parliament, many in Amman are starting to believe that it should be dissolved. Government officials have privately confided to the Ambassador that they are open to the possibility of disbanding the current parliament if the right opportunity came along, and hint that movement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could provide a suitable excuse to do so. A previous experiment of direct government rule without a parliament produced negative ripple effects that are still being felt six years later. While the optics of a parliamentary dissolution would not be favorable, if such a move came in the context of a larger political reform it could be a net gain for democracy in Jordan. End Summary.

Is Dissolution An Option?

[¶2.](#) (SBU) Jordan's media and political elite frequently discuss the possibility of dissolving parliament. While the idea is a staple of discussions in political salons, in recent months it has frequently crossed into the public sphere. During the recent extraordinary session, some media commentators openly advocated for the idea. A poll conducted in June by Jordan University's Center for Strategic Studies found that 42% of respondents supported dissolution of the parliament before the scheduled end of its term in 2011. An online poll sponsored by Jordan's major media outlets in August found 94% of respondents in favor of dissolution.

[¶3.](#) (S/NF) Like many other political rumors in Jordan, the talk about parliament's imminent demise has a grain of truth. Both Royal Court Chief Nasser Lozi and PM Nader Dahabi have told us privately on several occasions that they see parliament as unnecessarily obstructive to government operations. Both would like to see it dissolved. In the absence of a specific reason to justify such a move, however, there seems to be little impetus to take what would be seen as a drastic step.

When, Why, How?

[¶4.](#) (S/NF) Government officials have hinted that movement on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could present an ideal opportunity for parliament's dissolution. During the future transition to a post-conflict regime, it is assumed that the King will need to prepare a new framework for Jordanian political life. Many in Jordan's political elite believe that the post-resolution political order will result in a more

open, democratic system that will require a new electoral law. The main point of a new electoral law would presumably be to remove the quotas and district boundaries which skew parliamentary results in favor of rural East Bankers at the expense of urban Palestinians.

¶15. (SBU) Rather than trust the current unrepresentative parliament with the task of remaking Jordan's electoral system, the political elite has been led to believe that the King will want to take a more direct hand in shaping a future political system. The assumption is that in the wake of a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the King will dissolve parliament and appoint a government with a mandate to implement political and economic reforms without a parliament from the pre-solution era to impede progress.

The Previous Dissolution Experiment

¶16. (SBU) While the idea of dissolving parliament appears favorable from the perspective of government efficiency, the previous experiment with ruling by decree was not entirely positive. Shortly after September 11, 2001, King Abdullah dissolved parliament and appointed Ali Abu Ragheb as Prime Minister. For the next two years, policy was implemented as a series of provisional laws. (Note: Under Jordan's constitution, the government can impose laws directly in the absence of parliament. When parliament returns, it can annul, alter, or approve the laws. End Note.) While many of these laws were designed to revamp Jordan's economy and promote privatization, several key political statutes were also enacted without popular input. Some of the most controversial political measures (including the current electoral law and public gatherings law) date from the Abu Ragheb period.

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¶17. (SBU) The two year experiment with rule by decree placed a large burden on future parliaments whose impact is still being felt today. Even six years since the return of representative government in Jordan, parliament still has hundreds of laws implemented between 2001 and 2003 that it has yet to consider. While some of these are technical bills with little practical impact, many are complicated or politically controversial bills such as the electoral law which have too much political baggage for the government and parliamentary leadership to bring forward. The leftover bills remain a drag on parliament's agenda, in many cases preventing it from moving forward on current legislation so that the past can be dealt with. In many cases, provisional laws from earlier in the decade must be approved, amended, or defeated before new legislation on the same topics can move forward. During parliament's 2009 extraordinary session, over one quarter of the bills on the agenda were provisional laws from the Abu Ragheb era that had to be voted on before current reforms could be considered.

Comment: Our Response To Dissolution

¶18. (S/NF) Dissolution of the Jordanian parliament, regardless of the reasoning behind it, would create a political and public diplomacy conundrum for supporters of democratic change. Despite the severe limitations on its powers and basic inability to create policy, parliament represents one of the few institutions which maintain the veneer of democracy in Jordan. Almost all of the key political decisions in Jordan are made in the executive branch, yet the existence of parliament gives those decisions at least the appearance of popular legitimacy. Without parliament, even this appearance of popular input into policy will effectively vanish. Such a move would likely be heavily criticized internationally as a backward step.

¶19. (S/NF) At the same time, MPs have consistently used their

only power -- the ability to alter or vote down legislation -- as a way to scuttle reform in Jordan. From tax legislation to social security reform, public gatherings limitations to the legal framework for civil society, parliamentarians have consistently stood in the way of legislation that matters. Officials in the executive branch occasionally encourage parliamentary rejection of forward-looking measures so they can say that they tried and failed to produce reform (as in recent attempts to amend the labor law). Yet there are many more instances of parliament altering or voting down the important details of carefully crafted legislation based on faulty information or even willful ignorance (as in the law on associations and recent tax legislation).

¶10. (S/NF) Our response to a dissolution of parliament would have to take into account the move's context. While the dissolution of parliament would on its face eliminate Jordan's remaining claims to a democratic system, conventional wisdom in Amman holds that it would be part of a comprehensive re-shaping of the political system. While past experience has shown that the Jordanian government often fails to completely follow through on democratic reform, if parliament is dissolved in order to reset the fundamentals of Jordanian political life as part of a constitutional reform or change in the electoral law, Jordanian democracy could emerge more robust.

Beecroft